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## **Nutrition Education Program at Child Care Centers Increases Fruit and Vegetable Consumption**

PENSACOLA – The Escambia County Health Department Nutrition Division and the Early Learning Coalition are piloting a nutrition education program for 3 and 4 year olds in 15 local child care centers, resulting in increased fruit and vegetable consumption among preschoolers.

The nutrition education program aims to teach healthy food choices and lifestyle habits to preschoolers in order to prevent and reduce the incidence of obesity in the upcoming generation.

Child care centers are the target for the program because the development of food habits and preferences occurs between ages 2 and 5, making exposure to healthy foods during this time important. The opportunity to try new foods provides an immediate health benefit and builds healthy food habits for the future.

“Prevention and early intervention are major weapons in the battle against obesity,” said Versilla Turner, Nutrition and WIC Director at the Escambia County Health Department. “When a child is overweight, it’s not just baby fat. Childhood obesity often persists and the longer a child is obese, the more likely he or she is to have weight problems as an adult.”

Escambia County Health Department’s nutrition educators conducted a survey six months after the preschoolers’ participation in the program. Results indicated that participating families, on average, began consuming one additional serving of fruit and one additional serving of vegetables daily.

In the nutrition education program, a nutrition educator teaches lessons on fruits and vegetables, breakfast, water and physical activity. The program uses puppets, movies, music and dancing, and touching, feeling and tasting real food to help children associate healthy eating with fun. Additionally, OrganWise Guys, a curriculum based on a cast of characters named Hardy Heart, the Kidney Brothers, Pepto the Stomach and Sir Rebrum, the brain, is incorporated into the program to allow children to become familiar with different organs in the body.

At the end of the daily lessons, the preschoolers take their lessons home. The nutrition educators’ goal is that children will initiate conversations with parents about healthy habits and increase their consumption of a variety of fruits and vegetables.

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